

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE E-9

WASHINGTON POST
28 June 1985

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Israel Gave Mengele Search Low Priority

The most puzzling aspect of the Josef Mengele story was the strange reluctance of Israel to track down the death-camp doctor and bring him to justice.

Israel, after all, is the principal refuge of Holocaust survivors, including that pitifully small number who encountered the Auschwitz "Angel of Death" and lived to tell about it.

Likewise, the West German government did not exactly cover itself with glory in the 40-year search for Mengele. The Germans would undoubtedly be delighted to have the case officially closed.

Our associate Lucette Lagnado has interviewed officials of Mossad, Israel's respected intelligence service, who made clear that for two decades the search for the war criminal had a low priority.

Even after Mengele became the world's most wanted fugitive, with a price of \$3.5 million on his head, the Israeli manhunt rested on the shoulders of a lone investigator, Menachem Russek. He works out of a tiny office in Tel Aviv police headquarters.

For various reasons, the Israeli government made a conscious decision to leave Mengele in peace more than 20 years ago. Here are the curious details of the lukewarm Israeli search for the man who was held responsible for the deaths of 400,000 Jews:

■ In the early 1960s, Israeli agents in Argentina were ready to nab Mengele after capturing Adolf Eichmann. The agents had Mengele's address in Buenos Aires and had studied his daily routine. But the successful kidnapping of Eichmann alarmed Men-

gele, and he skipped across the border into the Paraguayan jungle.

■ In 1962-63, teams of Mossad agents scoured Europe and South America for clues to Mengele's hiding place. They located him in Paraguay. But Mengele's hideout was too remote and too heavily guarded.

■ After 1963, with the resignation of Mossad chief Issar Harel, the Mengele search was all but called off, as the secret service concentrated on the growing threat of the Palestine Liberation Organization.

■ In 1977, with the no-nonsense Menachem Begin as prime minister, Mossad was asked once again to find Mengele. But the doctor's trail had grown cold.

Israel concluded, meanwhile, that it needed all the friends it could get in the United Nations, even if this meant courting Latin governments that might have harbored Mengele or known his whereabouts.

All these factors combined to bring the Israeli effort where it is today: in the hands of Russek, an aging and determined Tel Aviv cop and Auschwitz survivor. Most Israeli officials would be happy to have the Mengele case closed—the embarrassment of their efforts through the years buried along with the Nazi arch-criminal.

The West Germans obviously have even less reason to want Mengele alive, captured and brought to trial. Perhaps that's why West German prosecutor Hans Eberhard Klein was so eager to proclaim his belief that the skeleton exhumed in Brazil was probably Mengele. Throughout Bonn's halfhearted effort to bring Mengele to justice, Klein has taken refuge in the West German law that forbids him to search outside the country's borders.